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# Feldenkrais Method helps mind, body relax

By MOLLY GLENTZER

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Remember the skeleton that dangled so freely from a pole in your biology teacher's classroom? Well, he didn't have to stand on his feet like you do. He didn't have to hunch at a computer all day or lift screaming toddlers or swing a golf club or any of that. And he didn't have muscles to pull his frame out of whack. So he could stop reading right here.

The rest of us, however, might take some comfort from the Feldenkrais Method -- a unique type of mind-body work designed to help us move through life with greater ease.

One of founder Moshe Feldenkrais' mantras was, "Anything you can do, I can help you do it better."

Feldenkrais (pronounced FEL-den-krice) practitioners believe we don't have enough movement variation in our daily lives. In doing the same ol'-same ol' every day, we use a limited number of muscles, and the rest essentially go to sleep. Injuries, tension and chronic pain compound the problems.

"Pain is an action, a result of something we're doing unconsciously," said certified Feldenkrais practitioner Nancy Galeota-Wozny. "Feldenkrais is an undoing process. It helps you unlearn things that inhibit your full expression."

It's not really exercise, nor a substitute for it. In fact, it's so passive it looks like nothing is happening.

In a group class, students typically lie down with their eyes closed while they focus on finding every muscle in a specific area of the body, such as feet, hands, shoulders, hips or jaws. Some classes are more "global," addressing the whole system.

The outer simplicity is deceptive. There's a lot happening inside, between all those unused muscles and the nerve cells they're connected to in the brain's motor cortex. The exercises gently remind the body that it's capable of moving as freely as that biology room skeleton -- activating the brain and making it aware of the broader possibilities.

"Our nervous systems thrive on novelty," Galeota-Wozny said. "Feldenkrais work activates your nervous system to self-regulate. It's a potent pill for posture. After a class, you feel like a plant that has suddenly been watered after a week -- springy. It's not so much about movement, but bringing people back to life."

If you're hard-wired to believe there's no gain without pain, the idea that your body can correct itself may come as a shock.

Christine Gust, a corporate human resources manager for Baker Hughes, is a rock climber and former martial arts teacher who's been taking Feldenkrais classes about three years. "I work so hard at other things. To go to a class where doing less is better is a nice complement to all that," she said. "Here, I'm not fighting myself. It's like, how much pleasure can you get?"

Architect Bob Robinowitz took Feldenkrais lessons to help alleviate his chronic back problems years after several surgeries for herniated disks. "Getting out of bed or the car was painful," he said. "But after Feldenkrais classes, I started noticing I was moving more freely."

Before a recent class, one of Galeota-Wozny's students recounted how she fell while hiking over the holidays. She was amazed that she fell gracefully and didn't hurt herself. Other students chimed in with their own "elegant fall" stories. Galeota-Wozny said Feldenkrais work can "clean up your neurology so you're less prone to injuries."

Feldenkrais the man was a Russian who emigrated to Israel and then Europe in the early 20th century. He was a physicist, engineer and martial arts teacher -- and expert at them all. As an associate of Nobel Prize winners Frederic and Irene Joliot-Curie in the famous Radium Laboratory in France, he studied high-energy physics. During World War II, he helped to invent the first sonar detection devices. Also the first European to earn a black belt in judo, he wrote several popular books on martial arts. In his exercise classes for judo students, his theories about movement, energy and mechanics in the body came together. By the time he published *Body and Mature Behavior* in 1949, he'd also incorporated physiology and psychotherapy.

Feldenkrais died in 1984 but left a cadre of teachers and more than 1,000 documented Awareness Through Movement lessons behind. Galeota-Wozny uses some of his classic lessons in her classes and private Functional Integration sessions. She also teaches Bones for Life classes developed by first generation Feldenkrais protégé Ruth Alon.

Galeota-Wozny, 47, has practiced Feldenkrais for about 20 years and taught it for 10. She came to it as an oft-injured dancer/choreographer. "The idea of moving the body in new places was so up my alley," she said. "But it was like going to a new planet. Today, I feel I'm moving better than I did in my 20s."

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# Experiencing Feldenkrais

By **MOLLY GLENTZER**

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Forget "doing." Feldenkrais Method classes are about "being."

Nancy Galeota-Wozny began a recent Bones for Life class by telling students, "Do the movements as slowly as possible. Remember to move gently and easily; don't push through a movement. See if you can find the comfort zone, the easiest path through a movement." Her voice was calm and encouraging.

We spent most of the hour lying on our backs with our legs up, pressing gently into the wall with different parts of each foot as we exhaled. You'd be amazed how tired this can make a leg, even if you're in shape; and how challenging it can be to isolate your third toe. But we rested a lot -- to help the body absorb the "new" information -- and our eyes were closed most of the time.

Lie still in the dark, close your eyes and breathe deeply under any circumstances, and you'll feel refreshed afterward. But when we stood up, I also felt taller and more graceful. The next day, my spine sounded like a bowl of Rice Krispies. Galeota-Wozny said my system was "re-aligning itself."

A few days later, I took a private Functional Integration session. I wanted to see if it would solve a chronic knot in my neck, which seemed to have flared up after the Bones for Movement class. (Galeota-Wozny said chronic problems often surface when the system starts readjusting itself.)

The private session was even less active than the group class. I lay on a padded table, fully clothed, while Galeota-Wozny did the work.

Functional Integration is not physical therapy, medicine or massage, although it is deeply relaxing. Galeota-Wozny said her work wouldn't "undo" an already-inflamed muscle. She began at my feet, pressing gently to see where movement was traveling and how far it got.

"The touch is skeletal," she explained. "We observe the translation of force through the skeleton. All movement can be seen as a translation of force. When we are mobile, our bones are free to translate force. When muscles are stiff, they literally prevent that translation. They act more like bones, which is not their job."

She gently nudged spots in my neck, shoulders, hips and legs, sending "specific movement ideas" to my

brain. When the session was over, she asked me to sit up and notice that my back was holding itself up better. It was. My neck was more mobile, too.